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Unsettling stirrings in North Korea

PANMUNJON

If South Korea is "the land of the morning calm," Communist North Korea might well be called the "land where the son also rises."

Kim Il Sung, president of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea since its creation in 1945, 73 and troubled for some years by a growth on his neck, is in the process of handing over power to his 44-year-old son, Kim Chong Il.

Indeed, the South Korean vice minister for foreign affairs, Lee Sang Ock, the other day told a group of American newsmen visiting his country under the auspices of the International Cultural Society of Korea that the younger Mr. Kim "already has taken over a large part of the burden of running both the party and the government."

This dynastic transfer of power, unique in the Marxist world and hence perhaps unpalatable to elements of the North Korean politburo, has, in conjunction with a number of other events, sent alarm bells ringing in Seoul and in Washington.

Western analysts who believe the elder Kim still controls the DPRK fear that the aging dictator may be tempted to achieve at the end of his political life what he failed to bring off at its start, the reunification by force of the Korean peninsula.

Those who agree with Mr. Lee that the transfer of power already has largely taken place fear that the younger Kim, who did not experience the horrors of the 1950-52 conflict that cost the lives of millions of Koreans and 33,000 Americans, may be looking for a martial victory to cement his rule in Pyongyang.

Says U.S. Army Chief of Staff Gen. John A. Wickham, a former commander of the 39,000 American troops stationed along the demilitarized zone just 25 miles north of Seoul:

"In the Orient, what the father has been unable to do in his lifetime, it is incumbent on the son to achieve. It's an ominous kind of situation."

U.S. Eighth Army Commander Gen. William J. Livsey agrees. The soft-spoken Georgian, who is also the United Nations Commander in Korea, reports that the North Koreans in recent months have intensified the mechanization of their forces, upgraded and restructured their one million Class A reservists, and moved their strike forces forward to just north of the DMZ.

U.S. Army Intelligence sources have also noted a recent forward deployment of North Korean "river crossing assets," the construction near the DMZ of drive-through storage tunnels capable of concealing main elements of a major attack force, and an intensification in the training of North Korea's 100,000 commandos, the largest such special forces group in the world.

"We believe the potential for operations on the Korean peninsula is high," Gen. Wickham asserts.

The father-son hand-over is not the only reason a resumption of hostilities is feared. In 1986 Seoul will host the Asian Games and in 1988 it will be the site of the 24th Olympiad. If these two athletic events come off smoothly, South Korea expects to harvest a significant political dividend in the form of world acknowledgment of its status as a thriving mini-economic power, increased diplomatic recognition and, just possibly, admission to the United Nations. North Korea, scarcely able to pay the interest on its debts to Japanese bankers and its tottering economy unable even to clothe its 19 million people decently, is equally determined to force the cancellation of the games, or to ruin them if they are held.

Finally, while the balance of power currently is in favor of North Korea's 835,000-man armed forces, the world's sixth largest military machine, this may not always be the case. In addition to Gen. Livsey's 39,000 American troops, South Korea has 600,000 men under arms, and their effectiveness is constantly being upgraded. Thus North Korea, under new and inexperienced leadership, might well be tempted to seek a military solution while the balance of power on the Korean peninsula is still in Pyongyang's favor.

Obviously, the attitudes of Communist China (whose "volunteers" fought in the 1950-52 war) and the Soviet Union toward such a venture would be crucial. China, given its policy of an open door to the West, probably would oppose it; the position of the Soviet Union under the new and tough leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev is less easy to predict. In any event, the younger Kim is known to be both hot-headed and impulsive, and the possibility of North Korea acting alone cannot be ruled out.

While Seoul is obviously vulnerable because it is so close to the DMZ, the fortifications that ring it are sufficiently strong that many Western strategists believe the North Koreans would bypass it in their main push to the south, being content to reduce the capital with the short-range missiles already targeted on it. Simultaneously, the DPRK's AN-2 transports, the Hughes helicopters (up to 87 of them) illegally delivered to Pyongyang in March, and their more than 100 gunboats armed with STYX missiles would land their 100,000 commandoes deep in the south to disrupt communications, harass airfields and attack rear-area command posts. Others would cross into the south through tunnels under the DMZ (the South Koreans have discovered three more tunnels in recent years).

Pyongyang would rely on its 20 diesel attack submarines to prevent reinforcements or supplies from reaching to ROK by sea.

The very fact that economic talks between the two Koreas began in this DMZ village last week and Red Cross talks on reuniting separated families are due to take place in Seoul May 28-30 has raised the level of apprehension here: in the past, North Korea has waved an olive branch to lull the ROK before some violent act, as it did during the 1983 assassination attempt in Rangoon on President Chun Doo Hwan, in which four South Korean Cabinet ministers and 17 other people lost their lives.

In all probability, wiser heads will prevail and there will be no new Korean war, although there almost certainly will be terrorist incidents designed to ruin the Olympic games.

But one can never be sure when dealing with either an embittered old man or his impulsive son, the leaders of a joyless land where creature comforts are unknown. Certainly the chances of a major conflict on the Korean peninsula seem greater in this uncertain spring than they have for many years.

Smith Hempstone is a nationally syndicated columnist.